

An Atonement Update

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Abstract: *What does it mean to say that Jesus died to save us? The traditional account of atonement – in which Jesus becomes a substitutionary sacrifice for human sinfulness – is revealed as problematic as long as it is understood as a theory. In the experience of Israel, atonement was not a theory at all. It was a liturgy whose goal was not to placate some otherwise non-forgiving God (the Aztec or pagan imagination) but the more subversive action in which God’s creative, saving, redeeming activity is poured out to us despite our human sinfulness. Rather than invoke the idea of sacrifice as something God demands of us, by becoming the victim in our place Christ puts an end once and for all to the human insistence for sacrificial victims. This is what makes the Eucharist a liturgical event with such profound ethical implications.*

Key Words: Jesus Christ – Redemption; atonement; sacrifice; victim; liturgy; violence; substitution

I tried, over three chapters¹ of *On Being Liked* to set out some bases for thinking through what it means to say that Jesus died to save us. That was, and is, very much an ongoing project. Since writing those chapters I have been greatly helped by the work of Margaret Barker, especially *The Great High Priest*² and her study of the book of Revelation *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*,³ in helping me take this further. Barker’s insights seem to me to combine extraordinarily well with the New Testament detective work of scholars like J. Duncan M. Derrett⁴ and the anthropology of desire which René Girard has made luminous for us⁵ to offer the possibility of a richer and deeper understanding of the atonement, and one which will, I hope, not only help to overcome divisions within Christianity as to how Jesus’ death is to be understood, but also give a far more positive account of the Jewishness of that saving death than we are used to.

So, I’d like to give you a kind of progress report on where I think this understanding is going, by trying to defend a thesis with you. My thesis is that Christianity is a priestly religion which understands that it is God’s overcoming of our violence by substituting himself for the victim of our typical sacrifices that opens up our being able to enjoy the fullness of creation as if death were not.

The first thing that I ought to do, therefore, is to rehearse for you my brief account of what is traditionally called the substitutionary theory of atonement. This is what we are

¹ James Alison, *On Being Liked* (London: DLT, 2003), chh. 2, 3, 4.

² James Alison, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: Continuum, 2004).

³ James Alison, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

⁴ Derrett’s *Law in the New Testament* (London: DLT, 1970) is classic, and his several volumes of *Studies in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill) are jewels for those lucky enough to have access to them.

⁵ In more works than I can mention here. M.Kirwan’s *Discovering Girard* (London: DLT, 2004) is, by Girard’s own avowal, the best introduction to his thought.

up against. It is a certain crystallization of texts threaded together in a way that has kept us captive, and my interest is in how we are going to move from this two-dimensional account to a three-dimensional account and see that in reality all the creative lines in the story flow in an entirely different direction. So, here's the standard story, which, in one version or other, I'm sure you've all heard before:

God created the universe, including humanity, and it was good. Then somehow or other humankind fell. This fall was a sin against God's infinite goodness and mercy and justice. So there was a problem. Humans could not off our own bat restore the order which had been disordered, let alone make up for having dishonoured God's infinite goodness. No finite making up could make up for an offence with infinite ramifications. God would have been perfectly within his rights to have destroyed the whole of humanity. But God was merciful as well as being just, so he pondered what to do to sort out the mess. Could he simply have let the matter lie in his infinite mercy? Well, maybe he would have liked to, but he was beholden to his infinite justice as well. Only an infinite payment would do; something that humans couldn't come up with; but God could. And yet the payment had to be from the human side, or else it wouldn't be a real payment for the outrage to be appeased. So God came up with the idea of sending his Son into the world as a human, so that his Son could pay the price as a human, which, since he was also God, would be infinite and thus would effect the necessary satisfaction. Thus the whole sorry saga could be brought to a convenient close. Those humans who agreed to cover over their sins by holding on to, or being covered by, the precious blood of the Saviour whom the Father has sacrificed to himself would be saved from their sins and given the Holy Spirit by which they would be able to behave according to the original order of creation. In this way, when they died, they at least would be able to inherit heaven, which had been the original plan all along, before the fall had mucked everything up.

Now, rather than make mockery of this storyline, I want to suggest that the trouble with it is that it is far too little conservative. I want to put forward a much more conservative account. And the first way I want to be conservative is to suggest that the principal problem with this conventional account is that it is a *theory*, while atonement, in the first place, was a *liturgy*.

Now that doesn't sound like too much of a contrast in our world because we tend to have an impoverished notion of liturgy. And we do not realise how much our dwelling in theory complicates our lives. However, in fact treating atonement as a theory means that it is an idea that can be *grasped* – and once it is grasped, you have “got” it – whereas a liturgy is something that *happens to and at you*. I want to go back and recover a little bit of what the liturgy of atonement was about; because when we understand that we begin to get a sense of what this language of “atonement” and “salvation” is about.

Let's remember that we're talking about a very ancient Jewish liturgy about which we only know from fragmentary reconstructions of what might have gone on in the First Temple. For this liturgy the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies. Before the high priest went into the Holy of Holies he would sacrifice a bull or a calf in expiation for his own sins. He would then go into the Holy of Holies, having chosen by lot one of two lambs or goats – a goat which was the Lord, the other goat was to be Azazel (the “devil”). He would take the first with him into the Holy of Holies and sacrifice it; and with it he would sprinkle the Mercy Seat (the throne above which were the Cherubim), the Ark and so on.

Only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy Place. Now the interesting thing is that after expiating his own sins with the bull, he would then don a brilliant white robe,

which was the robe of an angel. From that point he would cease to be a human being and would become the angel, one of whose names was “the Son of God”. And he would be able to put on “the Name”, meaning “the name which could not be pronounced”, the Name of the Lord, represented by its four letters, YHWH. With the Name contained in the phylacteries either on his forehead or wrapped around his arms, he would be able to go into the Holy of Holies. He was to be Yahweh-for-the-day, an angelic emanation of God most high. (Remember the phrase, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”? This is a reference to the rite of atonement, the coming of the high priest – one of the many references to the rite of atonement we get in the New Testament – and of which we are largely ignorant!).

So, the high priest becomes an angelic emanation of YHWH; and one of the angel’s titles is “the son of God”. He sacrifices the goat that is “the Lord”, and sprinkles his blood about the place. The purpose of this was to remove all the impurities that had accrued in what was meant to be a microcosm of creation, because the Holy of Holies, in the understanding of the Temple, was the place where the Creator dwelt, beyond and outside Creation. The idea was that Creation started from the Temple Veil outwards, while the Holy Place was beyond time, matter, and space. The rite of atonement was about the Lord himself, the Creator, emerging from the Holy of Holies so as to set the people free from their impurities and sins and transgression. In other words, the whole rite was exactly the reverse of what we typically imagine a priestly rite to be about. We tend to have an “Aztec imagination” as regarding the sacrificial system. The hallmark of the sacrificial system is that its priest sacrifices something so as to placate some deity.

The Jewish priestly rite was already an enormous advance beyond that world. They understood perfectly well that it was pagan rites that sacrificed victims in order to keep creation going. And one of the ways in which they had advanced beyond that, even before the fall of the Temple and the Exile to Babylon, was the understanding that it was actually *God* who was doing the work, it was *God* who was coming out wanting to restore creation, out of his love for his people. And so it is YHWH who emerges from the Holy of Holies dressed in white in order to forgive the people their sins and, more importantly, in order to *allow creation to flow*.

The notion is that humans are inclined to muck up creation; and it is God emerging from the place that symbolises that which is before creation began, “the place of the Creator”. The Holy of Holies was the place that symbolised “before the first day” – which, of course, meant before time, before creation was brought into being.

The priest emerged from that and came through the Temple Veil. This was made of very rich material, representing the material world, that which was created. At this point the high priest would don a robe made of the same material as the Veil, to demonstrate that what he was acting out was God coming forth and entering into the world of creation so as to make atonement, to undo the way humans had snarled up that creation. And at that point, having emerged, he would then sprinkle the rest of the temple with the blood that was the Lord’s blood.

Now, here’s the interesting point: for the Temple understanding the high priest at this stage *was* acting “in the person of Yahweh”, and it was *the Lord’s* blood that was being sprinkled. This was a divine movement to set people free. It was not – as we so often imagine – a priest satisfying a divinity. The reason why the priest had to engage in a prior expiation was because he was about to become a sign of something quite else: acting outwards. The movement is not inwards towards the Holy of Holies; the movement is outwards from the Holy of Holies.

So the priest would then come through the Veil – meaning the Lord entering into the world, the created world – and sprinkle all the rest of the Temple, hence setting it free. After which, as the person who was bearing the sins that had been accumulated, he places them on the head of what we call “the scapegoat,” Azazel, which would then be driven outside the town, to the edge of a cliff and cast down, where it would be killed, so that the people’s sins would be taken away.

That was, from what we can gather, the atonement rite. But here’s the fascinating thing: the Jewish understanding was way ahead of the “Aztec” version we attribute to it. Even at that time it was understood that it was not about humans trying desperately to satisfy God, but God taking the initiative of breaking through towards us. In other words, atonement was something of which we were the *beneficiaries*. That is the first point I want to make when emphasizing that we are talking about a liturgy rather than a theory. We are talking about something that we undergo over time as part of a benign divine initiative towards us.

This puts many things in a slightly different perspective from what we are used to. It means, for instance, that the picture of God in the theory that we have that demands that God’s anger be satisfied, is a pagan notion. In the Jewish understanding it was instead something that God was offering to us. Now here’s the crunch with this: the early Christians who wrote the New Testament understood very clearly that Jesus was *the* authentic high priest, who was restoring *the* eternal covenant that had been established long before; who was coming out from the Holy Place so as to offer himself as an expiation for us, as a concrete living out and demonstration of God’s love for us; and that Jesus was acting this out quite deliberately.

There are a number of places where we get hints of this language. One of them is in Jesus acting out the role of Melchizedek. For example, the announcement of the Jubilee, which Jesus preaches in the synagogue in Nazareth,⁶ was the way in which the high priest Melchizedek would come back and work for the liberation, the “atonement”, or “redemption”, of the people. In fact, what Jesus says and does in Luke is to fulfil the Melchizedek agenda, which includes going up to Jerusalem and being killed.

There are different ways in the other Gospels in which this is depicted. The classic example is in St John’s Gospel, chapter 17. Jesus’ last speech to his disciples before the Passion is a speech based on the high priest’s atonement prayer. And Jesus then goes off to act out the role of the high priest who is making available the new temple in his body (which, of course, John had given us a hint about in the beginning of his Gospel).

One of the ways in which this is told in St John’s Gospel is that Jesus is crucified on Thursday, not on Friday. So on Thursday afternoon he is going outside the city walls to be killed at exactly the same time – three in the afternoon – when the priests in the Temple were killing the lambs for the Passover feast. So, while they were killing the lambs, the real lamb, the one who was identified as “the lamb of God”, was going to the place of execution to be killed. But – bizarrely – he was going dressed in a “seamless robe”, a *priest’s robe*: hence the importance of his robe being “seamless”, and lots having to be cast for it rather than it being torn.⁷ So the high priest was going – *the Lord* was going – to “the Temple” where he would be “the Lamb”, for, as we are told, when they look on him after he has died they see that not a bone of his body was broken, alluding to the Passover lamb.

⁶ Luke 4:16ff.

⁷ That Christian tradition has never entirely lost sight of this can be seen by looking at Giotto’s Scrovegni Chapel Crucifixion (1303-6), where the robe being handed over is very clearly priestly.

The identification is complete. And of course, Jesus cry on the cross in John's Gospel is "It is finished", "It is completed": meaning the atonement, and therefore the inauguration of creation is completed. In John's Gospel the "I shall go to my Father" is always synonymous with "I shall go to my death, in which I shall be lifted up, and that is how I will glorify my Father." All of these things we know; but usually we do not see them in the context of Jesus being the authentic high priest doing the high priestly thing.

You can tell that that was how it was read because in John's Gospel immediately after this, at the resurrection, we are transferred to the garden. We are back to the "first day" and we are in "the garden". Peter and John come to look, then Mary Magdalene comes in. What does she see? Two angels! And where are the angels sitting? One at the head and one at the foot of a space that is open because the stone has been rolled away. What is this space? This is the Holy of Holies. This is the mercy seat, with the Cherubim present.⁸ The Holy of Holies is now open, because creation is able to flow completely freely. No more tangling up of creation. The Holy of Holies has been opened up. The high priest has gone in who did not need to sacrifice a bull for his own sins because he didn't have any. Then he was able to come out of the place of creation and into the whole world.

And remember that in the epistle to the Hebrews, as in much of the Pauline literature, and in John's Gospel, Jesus was the Word of God who was with creation from the beginning – "all things were created through him". This is the high priestly language of the One who is coming from God to offer atonement so as to open up creation. That is what is being fulfilled. And you get a sense of a realization in John's Gospel that this is what has been acted out: Jesus' fulfilling of the liturgy of the atonement. So far so good! This is an explanation that allows us to see Jesus' "subversion from within" of the ancient liturgy of atonement – which was also practiced in the Second Temple period.⁹

In the Second Temple there was no longer a mercy seat. There was no longer anything inside the Holy of Holies. The priestly mysteries had been lost. And this was one of the reasons that there was excitement that here was a priest who was going to fulfil the promises and restore the priestly mysteries. But of course "restored" in a skewed, "off stage" way – i.e. the real high priest was engaged in *being* the sacrifice, "the victim", the priest, the altar and the temple on the city rubbish heap, at the same time as the corrupt city guys – which is how the ordinary Jews saw them at the time – were going through the motions in the corrupt Second Temple, which was not of such great concern to the people. They didn't think it was the real thing. Many of Jesus' contemporaries would have regarded the Temple which they knew and the priesthood which ran it as, if you'll excuse the imagery, the diet-Pepsi version of a long lost real Coke.

From our point of view these are all aspects of atonement. What Jesus was doing was fulfilling a set of prophecies concerning a liturgical happening, which is to us largely mysterious. The reason I wanted to tell you about it is that it is very important for our understanding when we see that this is not simply an abolition of something that was bad, but someone fulfilling something that was considered good but not good enough. Do you see the difference? That means that our tendency to read the whole world of priesthood and sacrifice as an "unfortunate Semitic leftover" is really very wrong. The Jewish priestly thing – apart from being responsible for some of the most extraordinary texts that we have in what survives in the Hebrew scriptures – was also *the pattern* which enabled the

⁸ For a particularly beautiful reading of this see Rowan Williams' "Between the Cherubim: The Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne" in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell 2000), 183-196.

⁹ Sirach 50 gives us a wonderful 2nd Temple account of the High Priest Simeon performing this liturgy with many of the ancient elements clearly recognisable.

relationship between creation and salvation to be held together. And that is the pattern of the Catholic faith, as I want to explore a little bit more: it is the notion of God making available for us the chance to participate in the fullness of creation by God becoming a sacrifice for us in our midst.

We are all – quite rightly – allergic to liturgy by itself. We are absolutely right because that is one of the things that the New Testament is insistent on. The genius of Jesus lay, among other things, in bringing together the liturgical and the ethical, which is why atonement matters to us. Because what Jesus did was not really, as it were, to fulfil a series of prophecies regarding a somewhat bizarre ancient rite that involved lots of blood and barbeque. What Jesus did – and this is the fascinating thing – was to make an extraordinary *anthropological* breakthrough. And this is where atonement is “substitutionary.”

Here I want to make a little aside: normally, in the “*theory*” based approach to substitutionary atonement, we understand the substitution to work as follows: God was angry with humanity; Jesus says, “Here am I”; God needed to loose a lightning rod, so Jesus said, “You can loose it on me”, thus substituting himself for us. Boom: lightning rod gets struck: sacrifice is carried out: God is happy: “I got my blood-lust out of the way!”

The interesting thing is that the New Testament points to an entirely different way of conceiving this: what Jesus was doing was *substituting himself for a series of substitutions*. The human sacrificial system typically works in the following way: the most primitive forms of sacrifice are *human* sacrifices. After people begin to become aware of what they are doing this gets transferred to *animal* sacrifices. After all it’s easier to sacrifice animals because they don’t fight back so much; whereas if you have to run a sacrificial system that requires you to keep getting victims, usually you have to run a war machine in order to provide enough victims to keep the system going; or you have to keep pet “*pharmakons*” around the place¹⁰ – convenient half-insider half-outsiders, who live in splendour, and have a thoroughly good time, until a time of crisis when you need people to sacrifice, and then you sacrifice them. But this is an ugly thing, and people are, after all, human; and so animals began to be sacrificed instead. And in some cultures from animals you move on to more symbolic forms of sacrifice, like bread and wine. You can find almost any cultural variation on the theme of sacrificial substitution.

The interesting thing is that Jesus takes exactly the inverse route; and he explains to us that he is going in the inverse route. “The night before he was betrayed...” what did he do? He said, “Instead of the bread and the wine, this is the lamb, and the lamb is a human being.” In other words he substituted a human being back into the *centre* of the sacrificial system *as the priest*, thus showing what the sacrificial system was really about, and so bringing it to an end. He was the Great High Priest giving portions of himself as lamb to his fellow priests, just as the High Priest in office would distribute portions of the sacrificed lamb to the other priests.

So you do have a genuine substitution that is quite proper within the Christian living out of Atonement. All sacrificial systems are substitutionary; but what we have with Jesus is an exact inversion of the sacrificial system: him going backwards and occupying the space so as to make it clear that this is simply *murder*. And it *needn’t be*. That is what we begin to get in St John’s Gospel: a realisation that what Jesus was doing was actually *revealing* the mendacious principle of the world. The way human structure is kept going is by us killing each other, convincing ourselves of our right and duty to do it, and

¹⁰ Some ancient Greek cities kept just such made-to-measure future victims in supply against the day when their sacrifice would be “necessary.”

therefore building ourselves up over and against our victims. What Jesus understands himself as doing in St John's Gospel is revealing the way that mechanism works. And by revealing it, depriving it of all power by making it clear that it is a lie: "your father was a liar and a murderer from the beginning". That is how the "prince" – or *principle* – of this world works.

So what we get in St John's Gospel is a clear understanding that the undoing of victimage is not simply a liturgical matter, it's not simply a liturgical fulfilment. Jesus is substituting himself at the centre of what the liturgical tradition was both remembering and covering up, namely *human sacrifice*, therefore making it possible for us to begin to live without sacrifice. And that includes not just liturgical sacrifice, but more importantly the human mechanism of sacrificing other people so that we can keep ourselves going. In other words, what Jesus was beginning to make possible was for us to begin to live as if death were not, and therefore for us not to have to protect ourselves over against it by making sure we tread on other people. Do you see how he is putting together the ethical and the liturgical into the same space so that this is a space of dense anthropological revelation? When Jesus brings together the liturgical and the ethical understanding of victimhood, thus showing us what we typically do and how we need no longer do it, God is showing us something about *ourselves*.

Now, this was quite clearly seen at the time, as is clear from references in St John's Gospel to Jesus' understanding this mechanism as that of "the prince of this world". But there are also some give-aways in St Paul that are very revealing.

Here is a story from 2 Samuel,¹¹ that takes us straight back into the world of expiation, propitiation and atonement, in the anthropological sphere, not the liturgical sphere. Remember, the two are linked, but they haven't yet been linked clearly:

Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David sought the face of the LORD. And the LORD said, "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death." So the king called the Gibeonites. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to slay them in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah. And David said to the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? And how shall I make expiation, that you may bless the heritage of the LORD?" The Gibeonites said to him, "It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house; neither is it for us to put any man to death in Israel." And he said, "What do you say that I shall do for you?" They said to the king, "The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel, let seven of his sons be given to us, so that we may hang them up before the LORD at Gibeon on the mountain of the LORD." And the king said, "I will give them." But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Saul's son Jonathan, because of the oath of the LORD which was between them, between David and Jonathan the son of Saul. The king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite; and he gave them into the hands of the Gibeonites, and they hanged them on the mountain before the LORD, and the seven of them perished together. They were put to death in the first days of harvest, at the beginning of barley harvest.

After a short time the famine and the drought went way. A lovely story! The interesting thing about it is that it makes clear something we often forget: how expiation worked. Here King David is expiating something, offering propitiation to the Gibeonites. In other words, the Gibeonites have a right to demand vengeance, they are owed something, and

¹¹ 2 Sam 21:1-9.

David is offering it to them. St Paul seems to know about this story since he says in Romans:¹² “What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not *spare his own Son* but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?” Do you see what St Paul is pointing to here? St Paul is saying that God, unlike King David, did not seek someone else as a stand-in sacrifice to placate us, but gave his own son (which, for a monotheist like St Paul, means himself) to be the expiation, putting forth the propitiation.

In the Samuel text, who is propitiating whom? King David is propitiating the Gibeonites by means of Saul’s sons. God is propitiating *us*. In other words, who is the angry divinity in the story? *We are*. That is the purpose of the atonement. *We* are the angry divinity. *We* are the ones inclined to dwell in wrath and think we need vengeance in order to survive. God was occupying the space of *our* victim so as to show us that we need never do this again. This turns on its head the Aztec understanding of the atonement. In fact it turns on its head what has passed as our penal substitutionary theory of atonement, which always presupposes that it is *us* satisfying God, that *God* needs satisfying, that there is *vengeance* in God. Whereas it is quite clear from the New Testament that what was really exciting to Paul was that it was quite clear from Jesus’ self-giving, and the “out-pouring of Jesus’ blood”, that this was the revelation of who God was: God was entirely without vengeance, entirely without substitutionary tricks; and that he was giving himself entirely without ambivalence and ambiguity for *us*, towards *us*, in order to set *us* “free from our sins” – “our sins” being our way of being bound up with each other in death, vengeance, violence and what is commonly called “wrath”.

Now, what is particularly difficult for us, and why I want to remind us that this is a liturgy rather than a theory, is that the way we live this out as Christians is to remember that the one true sacrifice – that is to say, the place where God gave himself for us in our midst as our victim – has been done. It’s over! The whole of the sacrificial system has been brought to an end. The Holy of Holies has been opened for good.

The way in which we depict this in our theological imagination is through the doctrine of the Ascension. Remember what happens at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. Jesus is with the apostles on a hillside outside Jerusalem, and then he is taken up into heaven. He blesses them on the way – i.e. we have the high priest. They stand looking up; and there are a couple of angels – who are, of course, our old friends the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, which has now become everywhere – saying “Why are you standing there looking up to heaven? Go and wait to be empowered from on high.” What we have here is Jesus going to “sit at the right hand of the Father”: the place of the priest – the Word, the Creator – the sacrifice having been fulfilled. *We* live under *that*. And the way we live under it liturgically is by our participation in the Eucharist.

The purpose of the Eucharist is not us trying to make Jesus come down here but our obeying Jesus’ instruction to invoke him, to do this in memory of him, so that we find ourselves transported into participating in the “heavenly banquet,” the place where the Lamb is standing as one slaughtered, as in the vision described by the Book of Revelation. This is a Holy of Holies vision; this is a vision of the Holy of Holies now open and flowing everywhere. It is the one true sacrifice that has been done. That does not mean to say “over and done with”. It means that the victorious Lamb is there; his blood is flowing out; the victim, the *forgiving* victim, is present. And we have access to participate in that atonement, which has been achieved through it being made available to us in our Eucharist. What the Eucharist is for us is the high priest emerging out of the Holy of Holies,

¹² Rom 8:31-32.

giving us his body and blood, as our way into being a living priesthood and a living temple in the world.

Now, if that picture is true, then it seems that what our Eucharistic life is supposed to be about is that we are a people who are being turned into the new temple by receiving the body and blood of the self-giving victim, who is already victorious. We are being turned into the new temple that is able to participate in the life of God who is coming out to us here and now. That is what the doctrine of transubstantiation is about. It means: this is not merely our memorial supper; this is, in fact, the heavenly banquet where someone else is the protagonist and we are called out of ourselves into it. We are being called “through the Veil”, into the participation. We are given the signs; which is why the body and blood are not something that hide the divinity but make it manifest. They are signs reaching out to us of what God is actually doing for us.

Now, all that is happening in heaven. That is the purpose of the doctrine of the Ascension: the Holy of Holies fulfilled, and us beginning to receive all that flows from it.

This has ethical consequences. And these are tremendously important for our understanding, because, if you have a *theory* of atonement – something grasped – you have something that people can “get right,” and then be on the inside of the good guys. “We’re the people who are covered by the blood; we’re the ones who are okay, the ones who are good; and then there are those others who aren’t.” In other words, rather than *undergoing* atonement, we’re people who grasp onto the *idea* of the atonement. But the whole purpose of the Christian understanding is that we shouldn’t identify too soon with the good guys. On the contrary, we are people who are constantly undergoing “I AM” – that is to say, God – coming towards us one who is offering forgiveness as our victim. And we are learning how to look at each other as people who are saying, “Oh! So that’s what I’ve been involved in.” Which means that *we* are the “other” in this package; that *we* are the “other” who are being turned into a “we”, in the degree to which we find our similarity with our brother and sister on either side of us. This, rather than: we are the people who, because we’ve grasped the theory have become part of “I AM”, and therefore the “other” is some “them”. If you are *undergoing* atonement it means that you are constantly in the process of being approached by someone who is forgiving you. That, it seems to me, is the challenge for us in terms of imagination when it comes to imagining and re-imagining atonement.

The difficult thing for us is to sit in the process of being approached by someone. Because we are used to theory we want someone to say, “This is what it is. Get the theory right. Now put it into practice.” This imagines that we are part of a stable universe that we can control. But if the real center of our universe is an “I AM” coming towards us as our victim who is forgiving us then we are *not* in a stable place. We are in that place of being de-stabilized, because we are being approached by someone who is entirely outside our structures of vengeance and order.

Imagine what it is like to be approached by your forgiving victim. It is actually very difficult indeed to spend time thinking about our being approached by our forgiving victim! What is it like to actually undergo being forgiven? We tend to try to resolve this by saying, “Oh, it’s not being forgiven that matters. It’s *forgiving*: I must forgive!” So we work ourselves up into a moral stupor, straining ourselves to “forgive the bastard!” This then becomes very, very complicated. But in fact the Christian understanding is quite the reverse: it’s because we are undergoing being forgiven that we can forgive; and we need to forgive in order to *continue* undergoing *being* forgiven. But remember: it’s because we are approached by our victim, that we start to be undone. Or in Paul’s language: “even though you were dead in your sins he has made you alive together in Christ.” Someone was

approaching you even when you didn't realize there was a problem, so that you begin to discover, "Oh! So that's what I've been involved in."

Now, this is vital for us: it means that in this picture "sin," rather than being a block that has to be dealt with, is discovered in its being forgiven. The definition of sin becomes: *that which can be forgiven*.

And the process of being forgiven looks like the breaking of heart, or "contrition" (from the Latin *cor triturare*). What forgiveness looks like in the life of the person is "breaking of heart"; and the purpose of being forgiven – the reason why the forgiving victim has emerged from the Holy of Holies offering himself as a substitute for all our ways of pushing away being forgiven, trying to keep order – the reason he has done that is because we are too small, we live in a snarled up version of creation, and hold on to that snarled up version of creation because we are frightened of death. What Jesus was doing was opening up the Creator's vision, which knows not death, so that we can live as though death were not. In other words, we're being given a bigger heart. That is what being forgiven is all about. It's not, "I need to sort out this moral problem you have." It's, "Unless I come towards you, and enable you to undergo a breaking of heart, you're going to live in too small a universe, you're not going to enjoy yourselves and be free. How the hell do I get through to you?"

Well, the only way is by coming amongst you as your victim. That's the only place in which you can be undone. That's the place you're so frightened of being that you'll do anything to get away from it. So if I can occupy that space, and return to you and say, "Yes, you did this thing to me. But don't worry! I'm not here to accuse you. I'm here to play with you! To make a bigger space for you. And for you to take part in making that bigger space with me." And of course the way Jesus acted this out before his death was setting up the last supper, in which he would give himself to us so that we would become him.

This is a risky project. That is the point! That is why I want to bring together the notion of creation and atonement, recovering the priestly dynamic. This is the risky project of God saying, "We don't know how this is going to end. But I want you to be co-participants with me on the inside of this creative project. And that means I'm running a risk of this going places I haven't thought of because I want to become one of you as you, so that you can become me as me." We get this in John's Gospel:¹³ "You will do even greater things." And we think, "Oh Jesus is just being modest about his miracles." No, he is being perfectly straightforward anthropologically. To the degree in which, by receiving this sacrifice, we learn to step out of a world which sacrifices, tries to run things protectively over and against "them", to that extent we will find ourselves – as we *have* found ourselves! – doing greater things than he could even begin to imagine. That's what the opening up of creation does.

The opening up of creation works in our midst through the Spirit who is the advocate, the defense counselor, who therefore rejects the accusatory tendency. While we accuse, while we live in a conspiracy theory, we never learn what *is*, so we never learn to take responsibility for it. We never learn to inhabit creation with fullness.

Do you see that there is a huge movement in the atonement? The movement is from creation to us becoming participants in creation by our being enabled to live as if death were not. This is the *priestly* pattern of atonement; and it is the priestly pattern that Jesus had the genius to combine with the ethical, bringing together the ancient liturgical formula, the prophecies, the hopes of fulfilment of the anointed one, the true high priest who would come and create a new temple, the true shepherd of the sheep who would

¹³ John 14:12.

come to create a new temple – fulfilling those, and revealing what it meant in anthropological and ethical terms: the overcoming of our tendency to sacrifice each other so as to survive. That is the world, which thanks to him, we inhabit.

Now, do you see why I said that I wanted to give you a much more conservative account than the atonement theory allows? What we are given is a sign of something that has happened and been given to us. What is *difficult* for us is *not* grasping the theory, but starting to try and *imagine* the love that is behind that. Why on earth should someone bother to do that for us? That's St Paul's issue. "What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?"¹⁴ St Paul is struggling to find language about the divine generosity. That is the really difficult thing for us to imagine. We can imagine retaliation, we can imagine protection; but we find it awfully difficult to imagine someone we despised, and were awfully glad not to be like – whom we would rather cast out so as to keep ourselves going – we find it awfully difficult to imagine that person generously irrupting into our midst so as to set us free to enable something quite new to open up for us. But being empowered to imagine all that generosity is what atonement is all about; and that is what we are asked to live liturgically as Christians.

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¹⁴ Rom 8:31-32.